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26
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RAMOS
EARTH'S MIGHTIEST HEROES
THE AVENGERS

On a day unlike any other, a Dark Celestial invasion led Iron Man, Thor and Captain America to re-form the Avengers, adding Black Panther, Captain Marvel, She-Hulk and Ghost Rider to their ranks.

Since the dawn of time, the planetary defense mechanism known as the Starbrand has been wielded by a variety of people, granting them virtually infinite power. Over the years, the Starbrand manifested in several hosts, and the first walked the Earth over one million years ago...

EARTH'S MIGHTIEST HEROES #26

THE AVENGERS

Avengers created by Stan Lee & Jack Kirby

"AS STRONG AS THE STARS"

By Jason Aaron and Dale Keown with Andrea Sorrentino

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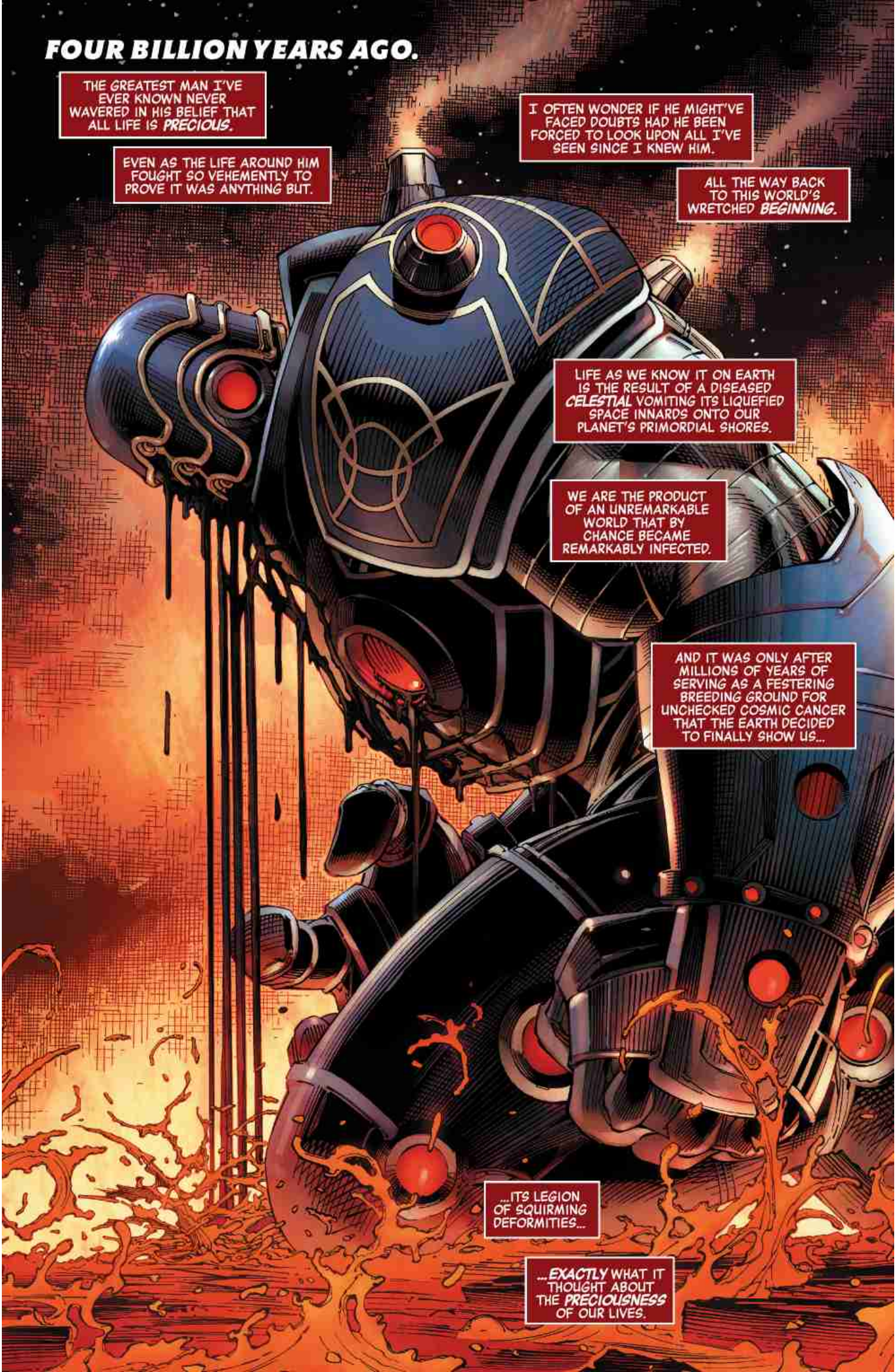
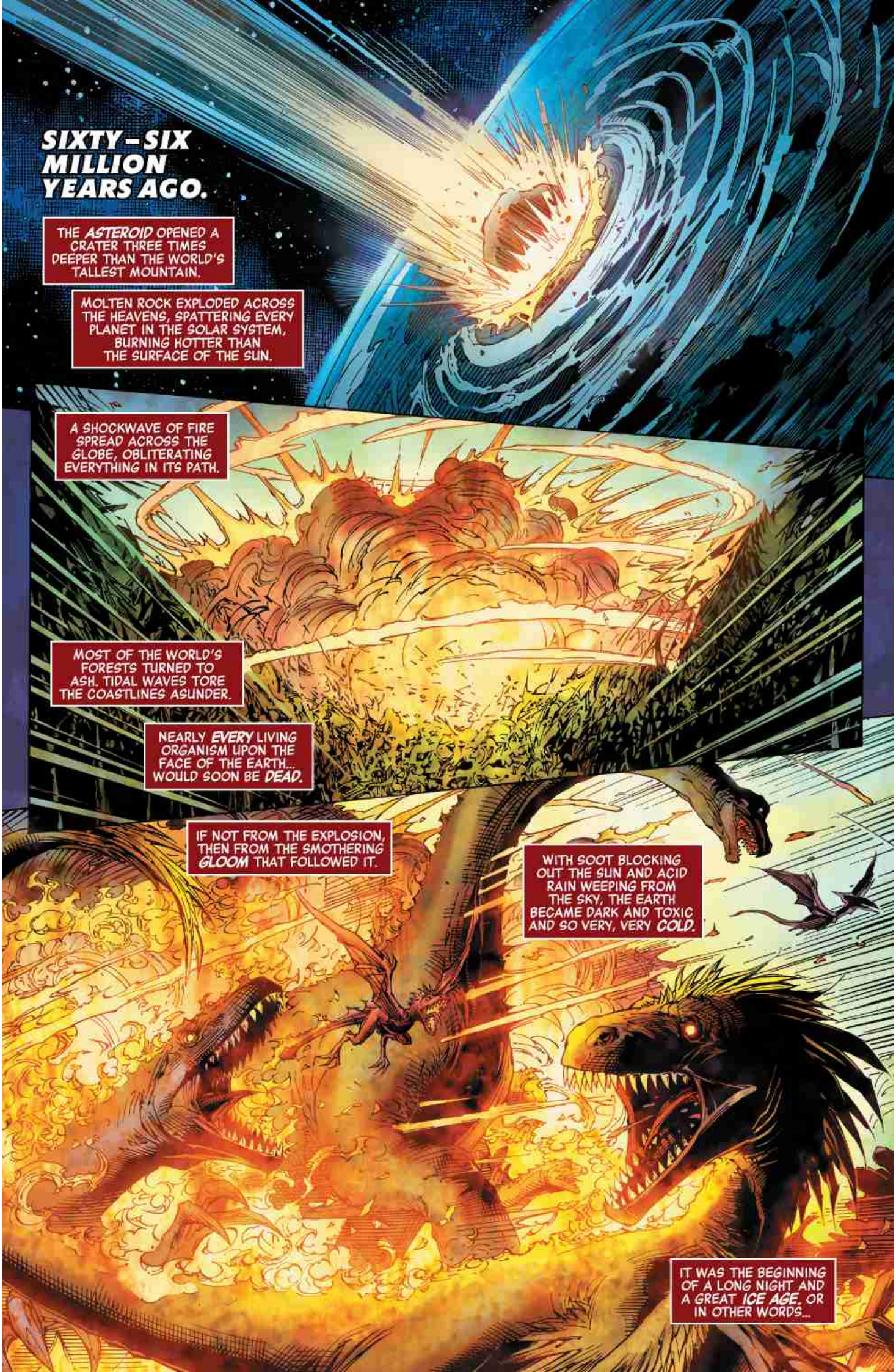
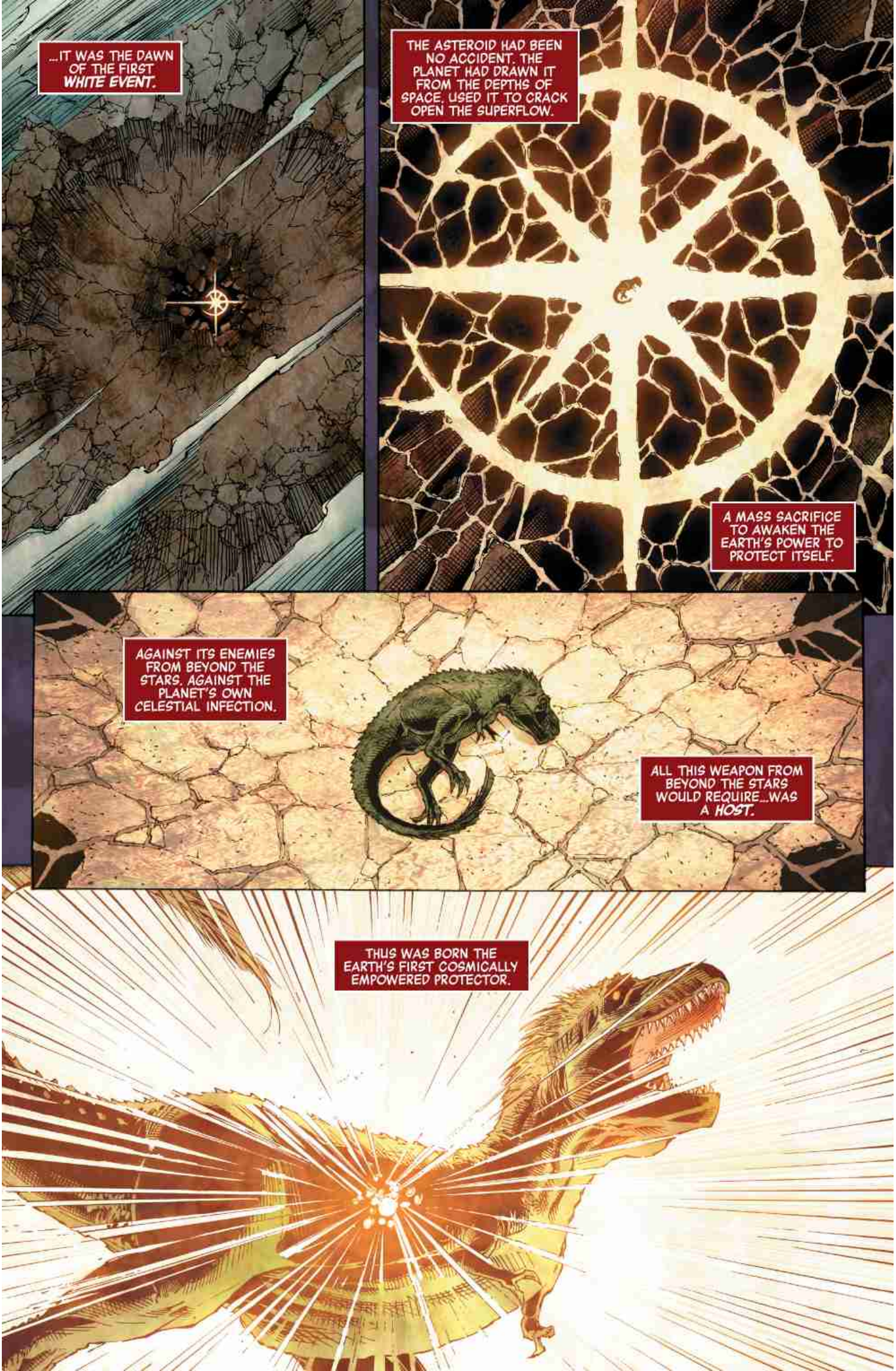
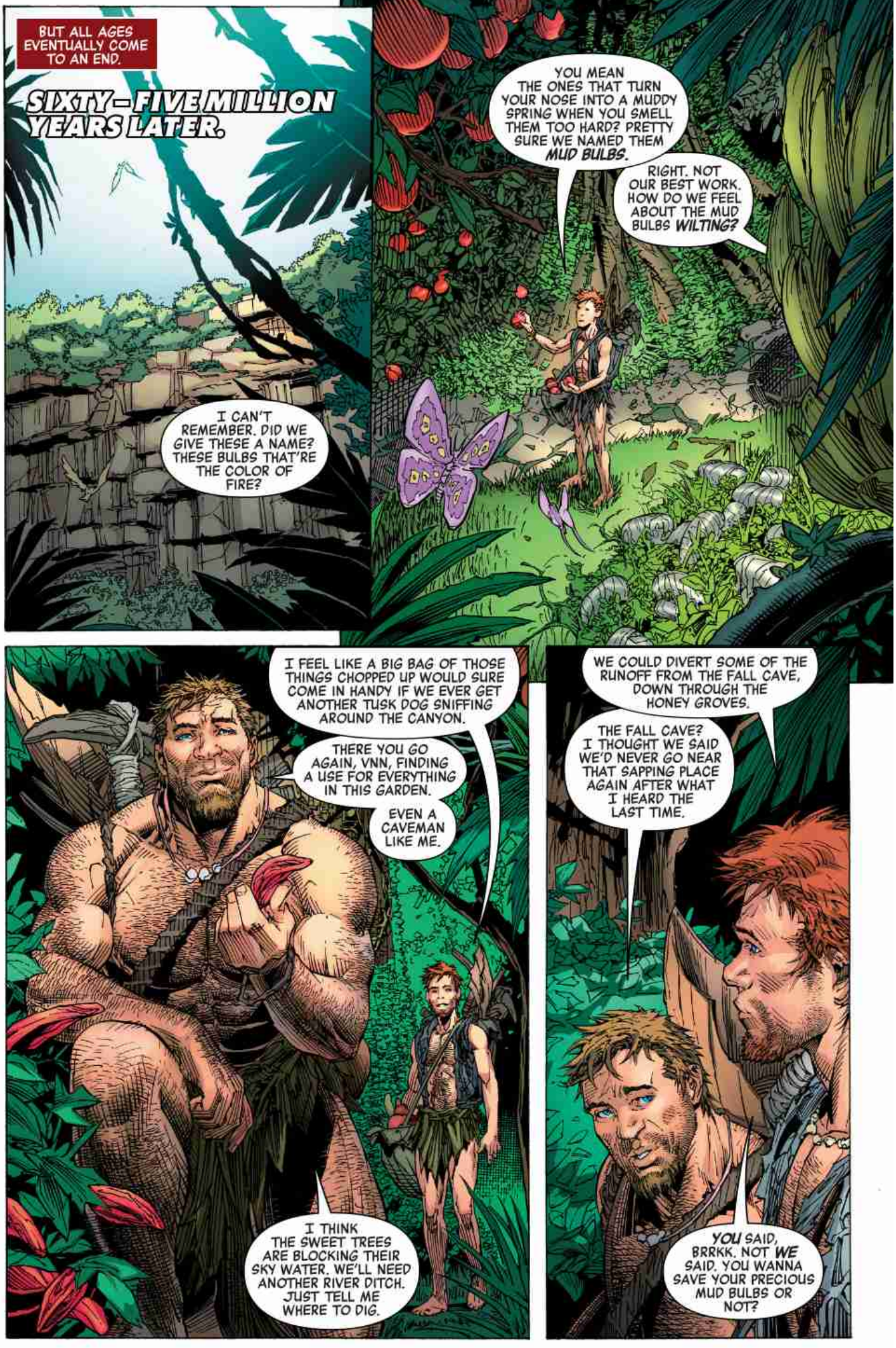

FOUR BILLION YEARS AGO.
THE GREATEST MAN I'VE EVER KNOWN NEVER WAVERED IN HIS BELIEF THAT ALL LIFE IS PRECIOUS.
EVEN AS THE LIFE AROUND HIM FOUGHT SO VEHEMENTLY TO PROVE IT WAS ANYTHING BUT.
I OFTEN WONDER IF HE MIGHT'VE FACED DOUBTS HAD HE BEEN FORCED TO LOOK UPON ALL I'VE SEEN SINCE I KNEW HIM.
ALL THE WAY BACK TO THIS WORLD'S WRETCHED BEGINNING.
LIFE AS WE KNOW IT ON EARTH IS THE RESULT OF A DISEASED CELESTIAL VOMITING ITS LIQUEFIED SPACE INNARDS ONTO OUR PLANET'S PRIMORDIAL SHORES.
WE ARE THE PRODUCT OF AN UNREMARKABLE WORLD THAT BY CHANCE BECAME REMARKABLY INFECTED.
AND IT WAS ONLY AFTER MILLIONS OF YEARS OF SERVING AS A FESTERING BREEDING GROUND FOR UNCHECKED COSMIC CANCER THAT THE EARTH DECIDED TO FINALLY SHOW US...
...ITS LEGION OF SQUIRMING DEFORMITIES...
...EXACTLY WHAT IT THOUGHT ABOUT THE PRECIOUSNESS OF OUR LIVES.


SIXTY-SIX MILLION YEARS AGO.
THE ASTEROID OPENED A CRATER THREE TIMES DEEPER THAN THE WORLD'S TALLEST MOUNTAIN.
MOLTEN ROCK EXPLODED ACROSS THE HEAVENS, SPATTERING EVERY PLANET IN THE SOLAR SYSTEM, BURNING HOTTER THAN THE SURFACE OF THE SUN.
A SHOCKWAVE OF FIRE SPREAD ACROSS THE GLOBE, OBLITERATING EVERYTHING IN ITS PATH.
MOST OF THE WORLD'S FORESTS TURNED TO ASH. TIDAL WAVES TORE THE COASTLINES ASUNDER.
NEARLY EVERY LIVING ORGANISM UPON THE FACE OF THE EARTH... WOULD SOON BE DEAD.
IF NOT FROM THE EXPLOSION, THEN FROM THE SMOTHERING GLOOM THAT FOLLOWED IT.
WITH SOOT BLOCKING OUT THE SUN AND ACID RAIN WEEPING FROM THE SKY, THE EARTH BECAME DARK AND TOXIC AND SO VERY, VERY COLD.
IT WAS THE BEGINNING OF A LONG NIGHT AND A GREAT ICE AGE. OR IN OTHER WORDS...


...IT WAS THE DAWN OF THE FIRST WHITE EVENT.
THE ASTEROID HAD BEEN NO ACCIDENT. THE PLANET HAD DRAWN IT FROM THE DEPTHS OF SPACE, USED IT TO CRACK OPEN THE SUPERFLOW.
A MASS SACRIFICE TO AWAKEN THE EARTH'S POWER TO PROTECT ITSELF.
AGAINST ITS ENEMIES FROM BEYOND THE STARS, AGAINST THE PLANET'S OWN CELESTIAL INFECTION.
ALL THIS WEAPON FROM BEYOND THE STARS WOULD REQUIRE...WAS A HOST.
THUS WAS BORN THE EARTH'S FIRST COSMICALLY EMPOWERED PROTECTOR.

THE MIGHTIEST HERO OF THE ANCIENT AGE.
THE STARBRAND.


BUT ALL AGES EVENTUALLY COME TO AN END.
SIXTY-FIVE MILLION YEARS LATER.
I CAN'T REMEMBER. DID WE GIVE THESE A NAME? THESE BULBS THAT'RE THE COLOR OF FIRE?
YOU MEAN THE ONES THAT TURN YOUR NOSE INTO A MUDDY SPRING WHEN YOU SMELL THEM TOO HARD? PRETTY SURE WE NAMED THEM MUD BULBS.
RIGHT. NOT OUR BEST WORK. HOW DO WE FEEL ABOUT THE MUD BULBS WILTING?
I FEEL LIKE A BIG BAG OF THOSE THINGS CHOPPED UP WOULD SURE COME IN HANDY IF WE EVER GET ANOTHER TUSK DOG SNIFFING AROUND THE CANYON.
THERE YOU GO AGAIN, VNN, FINDING A USE FOR EVERYTHING IN THIS GARDEN.
EVEN A CAVEMAN LIKE ME.
I THINK THE SWEET TREES ARE BLOCKING THEIR SKY WATER. WE'LL NEED ANOTHER RIVER DITCH. JUST TELL ME WHERE TO DIG.
WE COULD DIVERT SOME OF THE RUNOFF FROM THE FALL CAVE, DOWN THROUGH THE HONEY GROVES.
THE FALL CAVE? I THOUGHT WE SAID WE'D NEVER GO NEAR THAT SAPPING PLACE AGAIN AFTER WHAT I HEARD THE LAST TIME.
YOU SAID, BRRKK. NOT WE SAID. YOU WANNA SAVE YOUR PRECIOUS MUD BULBS OR NOT?

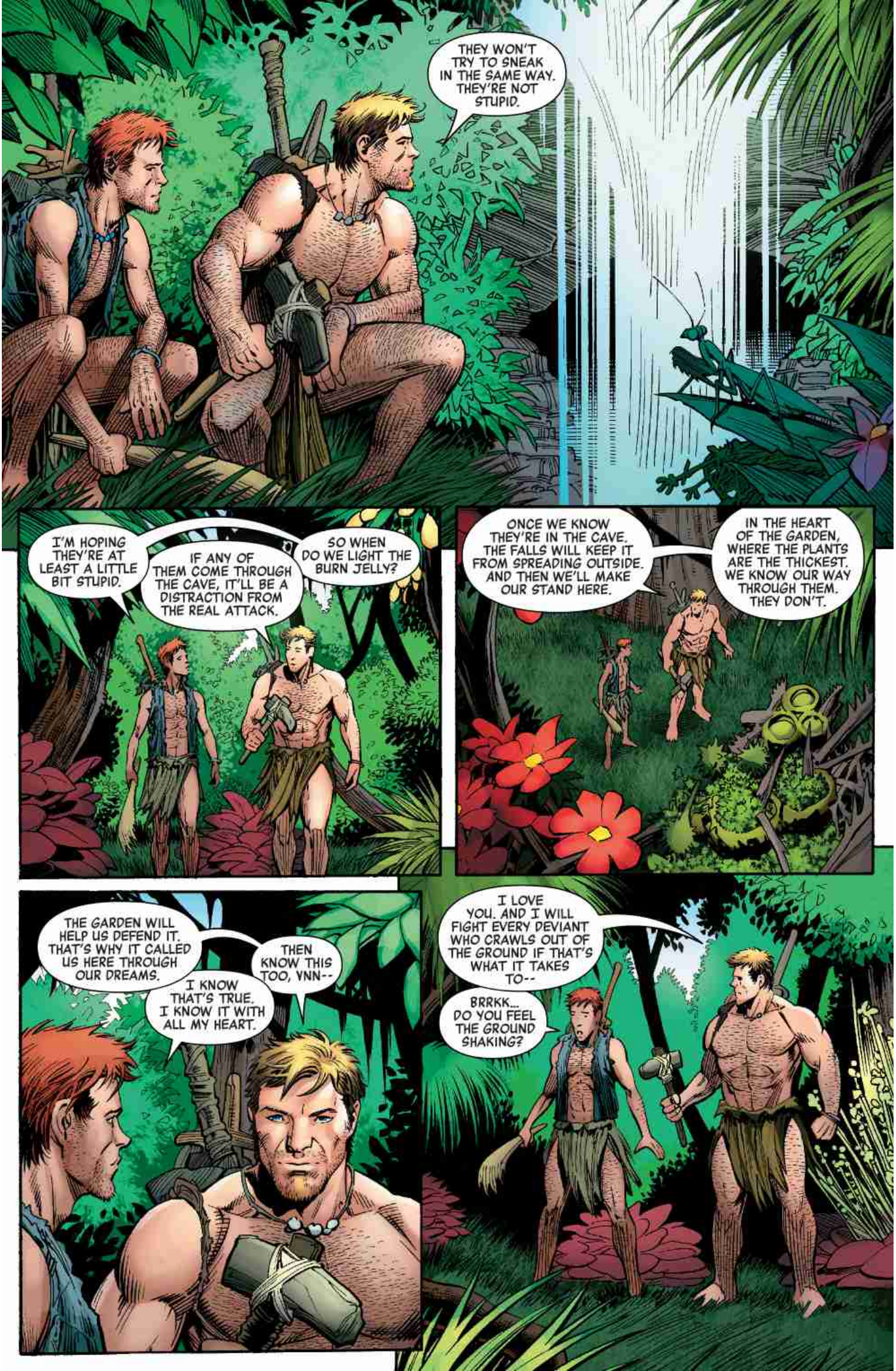
ALL LIFE IS PRECIOUS, VNN. BUT THERE'S STILL ONE THING IN THIS GARDEN I CARE MORE ABOUT THAN EVERYTHING ELSE PUT TOGETHER.
AND IT SURE AS SAP DOESN'T GROW OUT OF THE GROUND.
YOU MEAN THE ROCK FRUITS?
HEH. YES, LOVER. I MEAN THE ROCK FRUITS.
YOU'RE NOT A CAVEMAN, BRRKK. I WISH YOU WOULDN'T SAY THAT. YOU NEVER BELONGED IN THAT PLACE.
YOU'RE RIGHT. I BELONG HERE. WHERE I CAN THANK YOU EVERY DAY FOR RESCUING ME.
NOW LET'S GO RESCUE SOME MUD BULBS.
I RESCUED HIM. HE MEANT IT EVERY TIME HE SAID THAT.
WHICH MADE ME LOVE HIM ALL THE MORE.

BRRKK AND I WERE BORN DIFFERENT. FROM OUR TRIBES. FROM EVERYONE WE'D EVER ENCOUNTERED.
WE BOTH JUST SEEMED TO... KNOW THINGS THAT OTHERS DIDN'T. THAT OTHERS COULDN'T.
EVEN AS A CHILD, I UNDERSTOOD WHAT WOULD HAPPEN ONCE MY TRIBE REALIZED JUST HOW DIFFERENT I TRULY WAS.
SO I LEFT. WENT SEEKING A GARDEN I'D SEEN IN A DREAM. BY THE TIME I FOUND IT, I WAS BARELY ALIVE. AND BRRKK WAS THERE WAITING.
I'D SAVED HIM, HE SAID, AS HE NURSED ME BACK TO HEALTH. I'D SAVED HIM FROM GOING MAD, ALONE IN PARADISE.
VNN. GET BEHIND ME.
WHAT?

BUT IT TURNS OUT THERE ARE WORSE FATES IN THE WORLD THAN MERE MADNESS.
WE FOUND THE DAMN THING AT LAST.
TAKE THE GARDEN.
KILL THE MAMMALS.
DEVIANTS!
MUTATED MONSTERS WHO LIVE DEEP WITHIN THE EARTH. MORE ADVANCED THAN WE COULD IMAGINE. MORE DESTRUCTIVE TOO.
SUPPOSEDLY SPAWNED BY GODS FROM THE STARS. THEY'D BEEN SNOOPING AROUND AND SEARCHING FOR OUR GARDEN EVER SINCE WE FIRST DISCOVERED IT.
I TOLD YOU I HEARD THEM IN THE FALL CAVE!
WHY? WHY DO THEY WANT OUR GARDEN?
GET DOWN!
HHRRGH!

THE GARDEN WAS A PLACE OF PEACE, PROTECTING BRRKK AND ME FROM THE WORLD BEYOND JUST AS WE PROTECTED IT.
GAAGH!
UUUGH!
THE GARDEN WAS MAGIC AND WONDER IN A STARK AND SAVAGE WORLD.
SO OF COURSE I'D ALWAYS KNOWN...
HRR! THE GARDEN IS OURS NOW, PUNY MAMMAL! AND SO IS ITS SECRET POW--
RRRRRRGGGH!!!
...THAT IT WAS TOO GOOD TO LAST.

THE DEVIANTS HAD FOUND US. FOUND A WAY INTO THE GARDEN. WE TURNED THEM AWAY THIS TIME. BRRKK TURNED THEM AWAY.
BUT WE KNEW THEY'D BE BACK.
WE WERE TWO AND THEY WERE MANY. THEY HAD WEAPONS FAR BEYOND OUR OWN. THEY HAD NO QUALMS ABOUT KILLING.
I HAD NEVER FELLED A LIVING CREATURE, NOT EVEN TO FEED MYSELF WHILE STARVING.
WE HAD TO LEAVE THE GARDEN. WE BOTH KNEW THAT. BUT NEITHER OF US COULD BRING OURSELVES TO SAY IT.
WE KNEW WHAT WAS OUTSIDE THE GARDEN. IT WASN'T A WORLD FOR US. WE KNEW WHAT WE WERE MADE FOR.
AND WE KNEW WHAT IT WAS WORTH.


THEY WON'T TRY TO SNEAK IN THE SAME WAY. THEY'RE NOT STUPID.
I'M HOPING THEY'RE AT LEAST A LITTLE BIT STUPID.
IF ANY OF THEM COME THROUGH THE CAVE, IT'LL BE A DISTRACTION FROM THE REAL ATTACK.
SO WHEN DO WE LIGHT THE BURN JELLY?
ONCE WE KNOW THEY'RE IN THE CAVE. THE FALLS WILL KEEP IT FROM SPREADING OUTSIDE. AND THEN WE'LL MAKE OUR STAND HERE.
IN THE HEART OF THE GARDEN, WHERE THE PLANTS ARE THE THICKEST. WE KNOW OUR WAY THROUGH THEM. THEY DON'T.
THE GARDEN WILL HELP US DEFEND IT. THAT'S WHY IT CALLED US HERE THROUGH OUR DREAMS.
I KNOW THAT'S TRUE. I KNOW IT WITH ALL MY HEART.
THEN KNOW THIS TOO, VNN--
I LOVE YOU. AND I WILL FIGHT EVERY DEVIANT WHO CRAWLS OUT OF THE GROUND IF THAT'S WHAT IT TAKES TO--
BRRKK... DO YOU FEEL THE GROUND SHAKING?

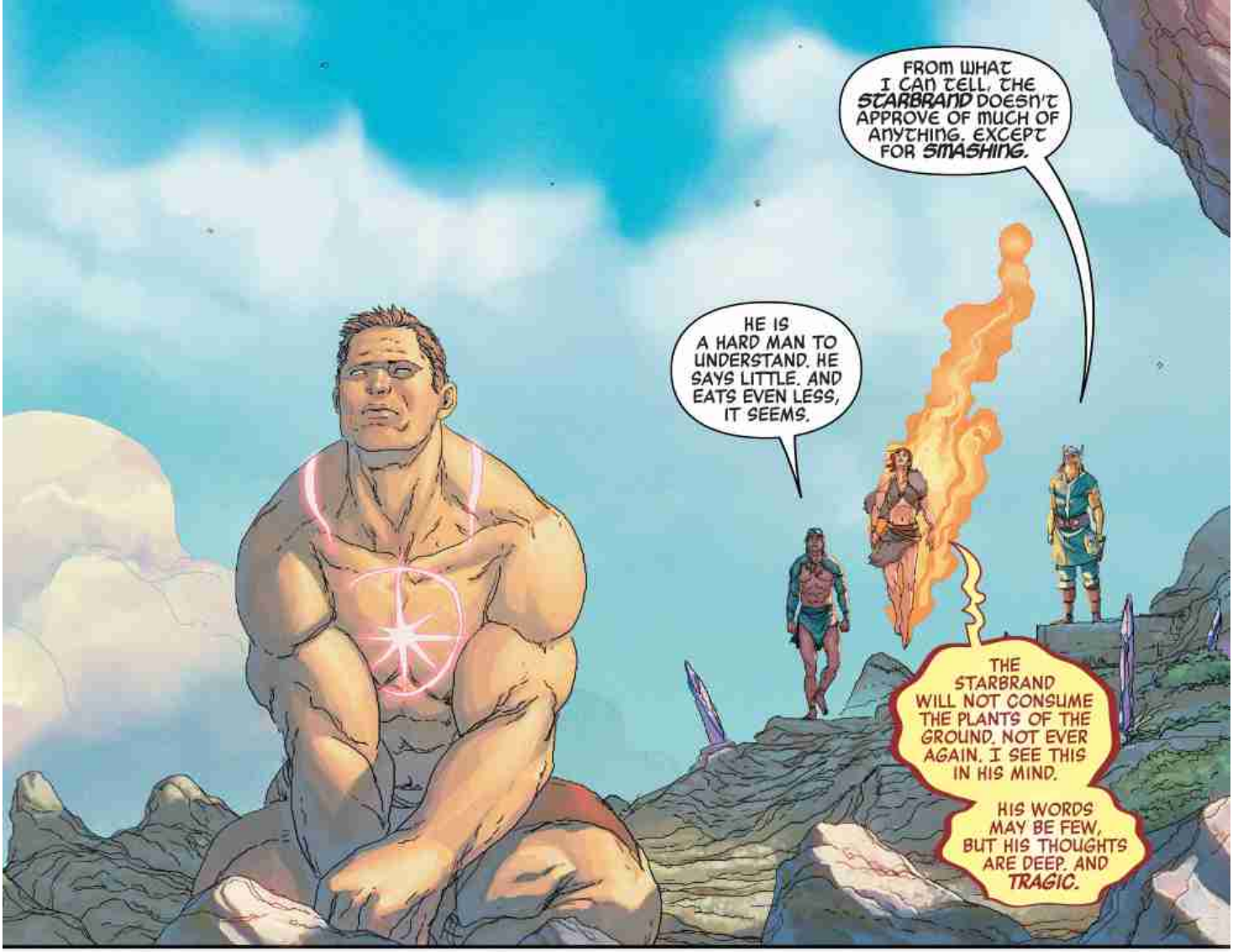
WE KNEW THE DEVIANTS WERE MORE ADVANCED THAN WE COULD IMAGINE.
WE WERE RIGHT.
WE SHOULD'VE IMAGINED HARDER.
BUT WE WERE RIGHT ABOUT SOMETHING ELSE AS WELL.
NO!
VNN!
THE GARDEN HAD CALLED US TO ITSELF FOR A REASON. THE SAME REASON THAT MADE IT SUCH A SPECIAL PLACE TO BEGIN WITH.
OUR GARDEN HAD GROWN FROM A SECRET.

=COUGH,F-
UUUGH.
BRRKK.
BRRKK, I CAN'T MOVE... AND I CAN HEAR THEM COMING. WE HAVE TO...
BRRKK?
BRRKK!!!
I WAS NEVER SUPPOSED TO BE THE ONE WHO FOUND IT. OF THAT I'M CERTAIN.
IT SHOULD'VE BEEN BRRKK. HE WOULD'VE DONE SUCH WONDROUS THINGS.
NO, NO, NO, NO!
HE WOULD'VE SAVED THE WORLD.
HHHHRRRRRGGH!!!

I JUST WANTED TO DESTROY IT.
WE'VE UNCOVERED THE POWER SOURCE. NOW THE GREATEST WEAPON IN EXISTENCE IS OURS!
WE'LL USE IT TO CRUSH ANYTHING, GOD OR MAN OR CELESTIAL, THAT DARES STAND IN THE WAY OF THE DEVIANT EMPI--
RRRRRRRRGGH!!!
THERE WAS FIRE IN MY VEINS AND A RAGE AS WIDE AS THE COSMOS IN MY HEART.
I COULD SEE THE DEVIANTS DOWN TO THEIR DESPICABLE ATOMS. COULD HEAR WORLDS BEING BORN AND CRUMBLING A TRILLION LIGHT-YEARS AWAY.
I HAD NEVER FELT SO VERY ALIVE, YET AT THE SAME TIME...

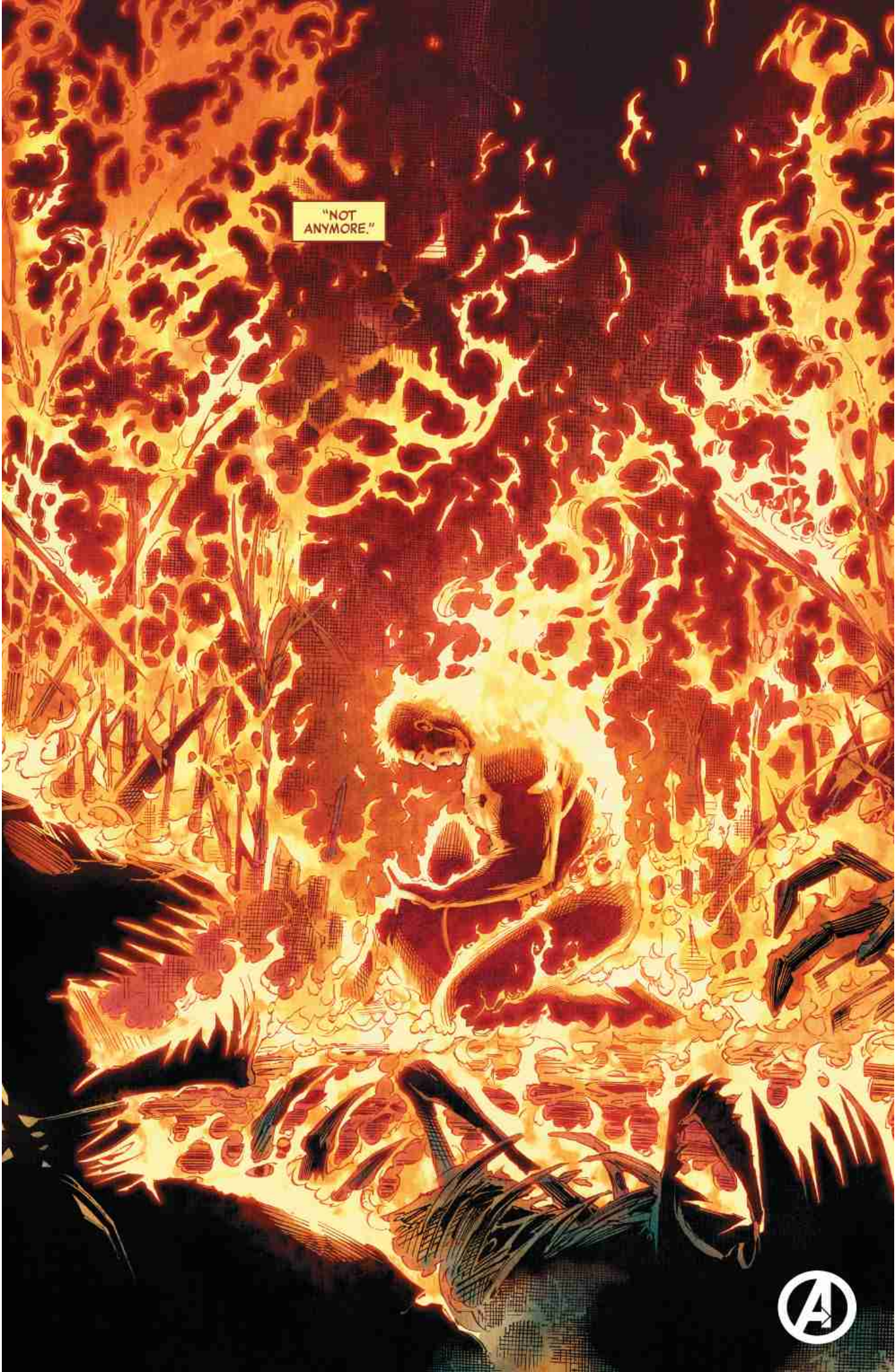
...SO CERTAIN THAT MY LIFE AS I KNEW IT...
...WAS DEAD AND GONE FOREVER.

I WAS RIGHT. AND NEVER WAS I MORE ALONE THAN ONCE I LEARNED...THAT THERE WERE OTHERS LIKE ME IN THE WORLD.
MONTHS LATER.
THE SACRED MOUNTAIN OF THE PANTHER TRIBE.
YOU ARE GUESTS OF THE PANTHER TRIBE, MY FRIENDS. PLEASE, WHATEVER WE HAVE IS YOURS.
EAT ALL YOU LIKE. THE PLANTS OF THE EARTH PROVIDE US WITH PLENTY.
HRGH. RATHER HAVE ALE AND MUTTON.
IT SEEMS YOU ARE NOT ALONE IN YOUR DISAPPROVAL OF MY PEOPLE'S HOSPITALITY, LORD ODIN.


FROM WHAT I CAN TELL, THE STARBRAND DOESN'T APPROVE OF MUCH OF ANYTHING, EXCEPT FOR SMASHING.
HE IS A HARD MAN TO UNDERSTAND. HE SAYS LITTLE. AND EATS EVEN LESS, IT SEEMS.
THE STARBRAND WILL NOT CONSUME THE PLANTS OF THE GROUND, NOT EVER AGAIN. I SEE THIS IN HIS MIND.
HIS WORDS MAY BE FEW, BUT HIS THOUGHTS ARE DEEP. AND TRAGIC.

WHAT ELSE DO YOU SEE, PHOENIX? DO YOU KNOW WHERE HE'S FROM?
NO PLACE.

NO PLACE THAT EXISTS IN THIS WORLD.


"NOT ANYMORE."

EARTH'S MIGHTIEST HEROES

THE AVENGERS #27

"STARBRAND REBORN" Part One: RIOT IN THE SPACE PRISON!

Artist Ed McGuinness returns for an epic space adventure that takes the Avengers into an alien prison the size of a galaxy, where a mysterious new wielder of the all-powerful Starbrand has suddenly appeared, unleashing cosmic chaos. Good thing the Avengers brought along their newest member, the Black Widow!

AVENGERS ASSEMBLE! EMAIL US AT MHEROES@MARVEL.COM AND MARK YOUR MESSAGES "OKAY TO PRINT" FOR A CHANCE TO SEE THEM ANSWERED IN FUTURE ISSUES!

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